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ABSTRACT

The existence of children's literature as a genre has, to a large extent, depended on its function as a force of social manipulation, rather than on any concern with literary value. The need to consider children's literature in the light of developments in literary theory that emphasize the importance of the semiotics of the text, and in particular, the way in which language controls the reader's response, can bring to light the processes in the literature of childhood that form the adult reader. However, while the children's literature specialist is investigating the workings of the text from a viewpoint that embraces developments in literary theory, the theorist almost completely ignores the texts of childhood. This study aims to propose methods which allow children's voices to be heard in a nondirected, open way. This research is shaped by seven case studies framed by three main areas of context. The first is an investigation of modern literary theory and its relationship to the books of childhood. The second is the context within which the texts are delivered to children. The third is the notion of reading history. Each case study is underpinned by the individual child's reading history, derived from interviews with parents, children and teachers. While looking for a way to give children a voice in the adult dominated world of children's fiction, this researcher found it to be in the nature of the text itself. (Contains 23 references.) (AEF)

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The Child's Voice in Children's Literature

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Through an investigation of the child's response to fiction, my research aim has been to suggest ways in which the usually silenced voice of children can be heard in the world of children's literature. However, in the course of my investigations in the past two years, the focus has shifted away from this more pragmatic approach, toward a more theoretical perspective, and an attempt to understand the forces that keep children silenced.

Central to this shift in focus is the understanding of developments in literary theory which have become the focus, in the last ten years or so, of many children's literature researchers. But whereas I readily admit the vital importance of considering the child's response to fiction in terms of the signifying force of language and all of the ideological implications of recent developments in literary theory, this is not enough. For, while those of us concerned with children's literature incorporate these perspectives in our own work, those in the Higher Places of Learning who deal in the theoretical approaches which now dominate Departments of Literature ignore what we discover and disregard the importance of the child's experience of text.

I am aware, and have been, since beginning to teach this subject at BA level four years ago, that the field of Children's Literature is regarded as suspect, and that many consider that it does not constitute a "real" subject or offer any "serious" engagement with ideas. Though I realize this is a somewhat caricatured vision, I would like to emphasize that this disregard is one of the most powerful forces that silence the child's voice, and the separation of the child and the adult in this way impoverishes our understanding of "literary response."

Before discussing my own research and the theoretical perspectives which underpin it, I would like to provide a bit of background for those of you who are not familiar with recent shifts in the study of Children's Literature. I recently presented a paper on my research to the staff and students of a Department of English Studies. There were immediate difficulties in discussing Children's Literature with those who have concentrated their literary study on "mainstream" texts and movements. Those texts aimed at children and the individuals who deal with those texts have, for the most part, been kept separate from the concerns of departments of English, Comparative Literature, Cultural Studies and the like. The placing of Children's Literature courses in Colleges of Education and Schools of Librarianship and the pragmatic focus on much of the criticism written in the past, makes sense in terms of the subject's link with education and the emphasis placed on the role of fiction in the teaching of literacy. Yet this emphasis presents a restrictive view of the subject, limiting not only the texts to their use by children, but reducing the role of childhood reading to a fixed and limited period, creating a false division between the child and the adult.

The existence of Children's Literature as a genre has, to a large extent, depended on its function as a force of social manipulation, rather than on any concern with literary value (about which many other questions can be asked - how do we learn to attribute value, for instance?). Yet the texts delivered to children with these aims in mind perform a formative role, admitting the developing reader into the realm of imaginative language and thus into the circle of influence of the ideological force of such discourse. Peter Hollindale, in his article "Ideology and the Children's Book" complains:

> in the very period when developments in literary theory have made us newly aware of the omnipresence of ideology in all literature, and the impossibility of confining its occurrence to visible features of the text, the study of ideology in children's literature has been increasingly restricted to such surface features by the polarities of critical debate.[1]

His own research and that of, among others, John Stephens out of Australia[2], attempts to redress this situation by grounding their investigations of children's text in the same theoretical context as those who deal with so-called "adult" literature.

Many will now be familiar with the position taken by Jacqueline Rose in *The Case of Peter Pan*[3]. Her complaint about of the bulk of children's literature criticism is that it supposes a

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nonexistent child, and works within a liberal humanist tradition, locking the texts into a role of seduction; the function of literature here being a socializing one, a way of "taking the child in." Depending as it does on an impossibility, the focus of all that has been written about children's literature and its effects begins to fall apart. She also notes that traditional children's literature criticism fails to address the problems of language and how it mediates texts and suggests that:

> The history of children's fiction should be written, not in terms of its themes or the content of its stories, but in terms of the relationship to language which different children's writers establish for the child. How....do these early works present their world to the child reader; what are the conditions of participation and entry which they lay down? (Rose, p78)

The revision that Rose implies here moves away from the construction of divisions which have kept the child separate from adult society since the establishment of universal education and which are strengthened by the intentions of the bulk of producers of children's fiction as well. Considering texts from a perspective of literary theory demonstrates that the "child'" in Children's Literature is not so much the real life child, but a construct of the text, in much the same way that the "implied reader" is distinct from any potential reader. It is also true that the essential role of adults in the provision and judgement of children's literature draws attention to the paradoxical nature of this subject. As Christine Wilkie, the Director of the MA in Children's Literature at Warwick University, points out,

> As any study of the history of children's literature will demonstrate, the history of, and the purposes and intentions behind, writing books for children have more to do with social manipulation and instruction than literary experience.[4]

Yet, if we are interested in "literary experience," we must also be ready to consider its beginnings, for the view expressed here implies that literary value is generally considered to be a feature of the "adult" text. In the past it has not only been this disregard of "kiddy lit" which has kept this field as a cozy encampment outside the fortresses of "higher learning," but also marginalizing forces from the inside. The emphasis on children's literature as a tool, or as the site for the battle between the didactic and the entertaining, or, indeed, as an easy target for the politically correct brigade has created a comfortable enclave that has not concerned itself, in the past, with more esoteric enquiry. But what is becoming clear to me and to many others, is that what is interesting about children's literature is not its differences, but what it has in common with literature in general. The current shifts in focus in Children's Literature studies have made these commonalties clear, and it is the coming together of the literary theorist and the children's literature specialist that offer promising perspectives from which to study the "literary experience" as a continuum, beginning in infancy. Thus the texts that one is exposed to in childhood and the ways these texts are provided, criticized and studied has a direct effect on any engagement with texts that follows.

The need to consider children's literature in the light of developments in literary theory that emphasizes the importance of the semiotics of the text, and in particular, the way in which language controls the reader's response, can bring to light the processes in the literature of childhood that form the adult reader. This has opened up the study of children's literature, and many researchers have embraced the perspectives of those concerned with theories of response, Marxist theory of the production and reception of texts and psychoanalytic theory. These texts, so prized as sites of nostalgia of an idealized childhood are now being prized apart, revealing the same play of linguistic codes, the same ideological positions that we see in any of the texts written for GROWNUPS (*though I agree that there are many differences - vocabulary, complexity of plot and character, etc.*). Perhaps this is one of the forces that holds us back - the deconstruction of the beloved tales of our innocence may reveal the uncertainty and precariousness of meaning which should only be the burden of the adult. Yet it might also reveal those forces which create readers and writers, for the literary process begins in our beginnings.

My own interest in Children's Literature has grown out of earlier research into images of childhood in the fiction of Victorian England, many years ago now, and my return to academic life

seems a bit like a fairy tale. In some sense I must have pricked my finger, slept through a revolution in literary studies, to be awakened by a bevy of princes and a few princesses, each offering a theoretical stance from which to marry text and reader. The time is exciting for those of us in this field - more and more BA departments in this country are offering courses in Children's Literature. These vary in focus - from courses concentrating on an historical development which parallels 'adult' fiction, to those concerned with a theoretical approach, in addition to comparative approaches. There are several MA programs which attract Literature students who want to study the subject from a literary perspective. PhD research is no longer conducted only in Education departments, but departments of Literature as well.

But there are problems with the rapid expansion of the field. The adoption of literary theory by the Children's Literature specialist has created a new area of study, particularly active in the USA, Canada and Australia which seeks to adopt the texts of childhood as vehicles for academic study without addressing the fact that these texts are intended for, and read by, children. There is a huge crop there, ripe for picking, yet this approach does not make best use of the critic or the academic researcher. What we are left with may reveal much about the text itself, but tells us nothing about the process of reading, about the history of the reader.

For this to happen, other blindnesses need to be cured. For while the children's literature specialist is investigating the workings of the text from a viewpoint that embraces developments in literary theory, the theorist almost completely ignores the texts of childhood. This creates a distortion in the picture of literature that is put before us, for what is not taken into account is the way in which the reader becomes the adult reader, or moves toward being Iser's "ideal reader" - or for that matter, what happens when that reader fails to become.

Questions might be raised here about whether or not books for children can be considered "literature." Among those who concern themselves with the nature of literature, Umberto Eco, for example, the texts of childhood are relegated to the "popular" category[5] and thus are examples of the Closed text. This is a shortsighted view, and it is clear from Eco's attempts at writing children's books[6] that his intentions match this reasoning. I would like to suggest that there are a number of books for children (sadly, only a tiny proportion of those produced) which display features of the "Open" text and offer a literary engagement. The reader is invited to join with the author in the process of creating meaning, he/she must tolerate ambiguities and gaps in the text, and both suspend disbelief and have that suspension of disbelief called attention to. Any doubts that children can cope with these sophistications are cast aside by the evidence from empirical studies, such as those of Carol Fox, author of *At the Very Edge of the Forest*, and Gareth Matthews[8], the forefather of the field of philosophy of childhood. In fact, my own case studies have supported previous data, illustrating the degree to which very young children interrogate the text and play with the making of meaning at the invitation of imaginative and generous authors. These interactions seem to occur most frequently in modern picture books - the pictures form a semiotic system which counterpoints the written text, demanding that the reader orchestrate the composition of meaning. This is a "writerly" reading experience in the most pleasurable sense, and the sharing of authority over the text is at the heart of a literary engagement. An excellent example of this is *The Stinky Cheese Man and other Fairly Stupid Tales* by Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith, which I will discuss in more detail later.

My own research attempts to bring together theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence to investigate methods which might tell us what happens when a child looks at a book. For, while we may claim that a literary engagement with texts operates in a continuous process beginning in childhood, we cannot rest these claims on unsupported assumptions about the way children read fiction. We may argue that we know a great deal about how they learn to read and what their stated preferences are, but we need methods for investigating what children are actually doing when they read. This involves talking to children. Yet most studies that focus on response are based on particular agendas. My own study aims to propose methods which allow children's voices to be heard in a nondirected and, I hope, open way.

This research is shaped by seven case studies framed by three main areas of context. The first is an investigation of Modern Literary Theory and its relationship to the books of childhood. This includes reference to new directions in the emphasis of Children's Literature research. The second is the context within which the texts are delivered to children. These forces - educational, editorial, paratextual - are controlled by adults on behalf of children, and my intention is to examine

the effects of these mediations on a child's response to particular works of fiction. The third, and most complex of the areas, is the notion of the Reading History. This is related to both a theoretical perspective of the continuum of reading response and to the mediations which effect this response. Each case study is underpinned by the individual child's reading history, derived from interviews with parents, children and teachers. This is intended to provide a perspective on the how individual responses to the texts read during the study are influenced by a progression from past experiences of fiction and, in particular, how the reader's developing perception of what fiction is for effects response.

It is surprising how frequently, when studying theoretical work, the consideration of childhood reading is invited, but remains a gap in the history of the continuum, nowhere more so than in Reader Response theory. The emphasis on the literary text as a reworking of previous reading experiences must surely be seen in the light of any and all previous readings. Eagleton, in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*[9] states:

> All literary texts are woven out of other literary texts, not in the conventional sense that they bear traces of 'influence' but in the more radical sense that every word, phrase or segment is a reworking of other writings which preceded or surround the individual work... all literature is "intertextual" (Eagleton, 138)

Though Eagleton is only concerned with the closed system of adult engagement with literature, his point invites questions about the role of children's fiction in this play of texts. We can perhaps all recognize the imagery and textual conventions which the novel has inherited from the Fairy Tale, for example, but what are those linguistic features, that interplay of codes that make it possible to read literature as it meant to be read? Where can we see the beginnings of these modes of reading that allow us to engage with the intertextuality referred to? Does it begin suddenly, when we are able to differentiate critically between "literature" and "nonliterature," or does it begin in those early experiences of text (this includes the experience of oral narrative, as well)?

We can view Iser's[10] remarks in a similar way; he says:

> All literary text must therefore be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative. (Tompkins p51)

If we are to include a consideration of children's literature in the light of this view of reading, we must ask several questions. Does this definition of literature include the texts of childhood? Surely, if the emphasis on analysis is focused on "that potential in the text which triggers the recreative dialectics in the reader" (*Act of Reading*, p30)[11], then we should be able to say that some texts invite a literary engagement and some do not. And then we might ask, how do we become the reader that engages or does not engage with texts in this way and how do the texts read in childhood effect that development? Barthes' system of structuralist poetics is as applicable to children's texts as to any others, and the notion of literary competencies derived from one's reading history, discussed by Jonathan Culler[12], can be seen to imply this continuum of response.

It is not in the texts alone that we can find some answers to these questions. Whereas Reader Response criticism concerns itself with the interaction of text and reader, we might look for the roots of literary response in earlier communicative acts.

Eagleton urges us to look for answers to "the problems of literary value and pleasure.....at the juncture of psychoanalysis, linguistics and ideology" and states that "little work has been done here as yet."[13] However, the promise of psychoanalytic criticism in explaining the beginnings of the process of becoming a 'writerly' reader has been addressed by Carol Fox in her study of the storytelling of young children, *At the Very Edge of the Forest*. These narrations perform a "writerly" function, calling attention to the telling process, and disrupting the illusory world of the "readerly" text. Fox places these narrative acts in the context of the reading histories of these children. These are children who, through exposure to story reading and a wide variety of texts have both a perception of what fiction is and what words can do, and demonstrate an underlying awareness of "intertextuality" and a "literary engagement" with texts. However, it is her rereading of Lacan which points to the roots of response.

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> the mother does not hold proto-conversations or use baby talk with her baby to rehearse the rules of turntaking and grammar, though these are spinoffs of the activity. She is rather reflecting the child's subjectivity in an imaginary relation, by means of which the child will come to know that things are signifiable. This formation combines affectivity, social relationships, language and discourse in the constitution of the subject, and places Lacan's "fictional direction" at the center of development. (Fox, p32)

It is the link between these early experiences of story and the dawning of subjectivity which seems to hold the key to an understanding of the 'writerly' engagement with texts which, I am suggesting, represents the beginning of a continuum which may or may not lead to literature.

Julie Kristeva's work with the Lacanian theory of the Imaginary centers on the roots of the creative process in this prelinguistic period which "lays the foundation of semiotic material which remains active beneath the mature linguistic performance of the adult."[14] This is found in the babbling, rhythmic, alliterative play with language which is part of both child expression and a part of the most imaginative of children's books. This playfulness is also part of the testing of authority which occurs in the entrance into the controlling "symbolic order" that represses the "incandescence" of creativity. Kristeva is here concerned with the sublimation of these repressed desires to return to this imaginary state and its influence on the creative artist, but I would like to suggest that the "writerly" reader who shares "authority" with the writer is also deriving pleasure from a similar, if not such an extreme sublimation.

Cathy Urwin[15] is persuasive in the connections she draws between the taking up of a subjective position and the power relations with respect to discourse. She sees, at the onset of the mirror stage, the disjunction of the infant's position in relation to its mother, shown in social games where the mother plays with illusions of control. She considers book-reading to be a site of this illusory power play.

Entry into the symbolic order is also the occasion of a kind of closure in this sense - it is a part of the process of early language acquisition, and certainly these early experiences with narrative (prior to learning to read) serve as occasions for the adult to fix the sign and introduce the child to the signifying system and so the ideological influence of language.

This fixing of meaning is operated by the adult and it is this relationship between the child, the system and the text that is central to the notion of a Reading History. If we can assume for the moment, that the creative and interactive relationship with literature is somehow present in the earliest experiences with communication (and I don't mean merely verbal communication here), we can see that any individual's reading history is influenced by the mediation of the adult. This is perhaps the point at which children's literature becomes a special case, for the relationship between reader and text is always regulated by adult, and, in a wider sense, social and ideological forces.

It is also tempting, when considering the reading of fiction as a continuum, to recast some of the key precepts of Bakhtinian theory in terms of not only the history of literature, but the history of the reader (or, indeed, the writer). Features of his notion of the Carnivalesque as a force in the development of the novel, can also be recognized as a force in the development of the reader. The roots of novelistic discourse in the parodic, playful, authority-challenging and grotesque can be reinterpreted to take account of these forces in both the literature of early childhood and the language of young children. (A similar reexamination is invited by his work on heteroglossia) And just as the presence of these stasis-challenging forms of discourse enliven the novel form, so the play with words, the testing of power over image and language, the uneasy mocking humor to be found in, say, *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak, can be perceived as a force in some of the best literature for children; a force, I would argue, that gives life to the reader, and encourages an interactive, transformational way of reading. This kind of reading constitutes a threat which brings us to the notion of the subversive. Play with language and the polysemic interplay of picture and text in many modern picture books manifest the parodic function Kristeva sees as the threat of poetic language - freeing the sign from its denotation.

The urge to stabilise subversive forces in language is expressed on more levels than merely the words on the page and this invites an approach to the text which encompasses bibliographic and social features of readership. The study of textuality and a Marxist perspective on literature

emphasizes the need to view the book, not only in terms of the ideal relationship that is formed between reader and author, but in terms of the text's production and material reality. If viewed in this way, the study of children's literature has a double focus. On the one hand, we can investigate how these mediating forces influence the child's response to texts, and on the other, we might see the importance of these forces in creating the readers and writers that arise out of this introduction to literature. Manfred Naumann, in his article "Literary Production and Reception" identifies these mediating functions in

> publishing houses, bookstores, and libraries, as well as in literary criticism and propaganda, literary instruction in schools, the study of literature, and all other institutions which mediate, materially or ideally, between the work produced and the reader. It is not therefore literature or works 'in themselves' to which the reader establishes a relation in reading them. It is works, rather, which out of the potential stock of produced works have been selected, propagated, and evaluated by social institutions, according to ideological, aesthetic, economic, or other viewpoints, and whose road to the reader has additionally been cleared by measures of the most varied sort (advertising, book production, reviews, commentary, discussions of the work, public reading, literary prizes, popularization of the author and so on) (p119)[16]

It is clear to me that these mediations include not only the literary instruction in schools which he highlights, but all those forces which make meaning for the child reader, not only in regard to how the texts they read establish a relationship to language, but what literature might be for, what their role as readers can be and how readers are thus culturally inscribed. We must begin there, if we are to understand the forces that influence response throughout a reader's history.

This also means that textuality must be defined as "a phenomenal event," and that "reading itself can only be understood when it has assumed specific material constitutions" (McGann, p5).[17]

Because my own research involves an investigation into the mediations which operate between the child and the text, this definition of textuality is essential, as it includes those paratextual features such as editorial control, cover, typeface, blurb, etc, which influence choice, expectation and thus, response.

Authors of some modern children's books demonstrate their awareness of the importance of the bibliographic features of narrative and call attention to the textualities which surround us. In books like *The Stinky Cheeseman*, Jon Scieszka and his illustrator Lane Smith play with the form of the book, from the flyleaf to the ISBN number, calling attention the material reality of the text and its importance to the process of reading in a decidedly Post-modern way. The use of this book in my research provides an example of how the responses of the individual readers reveal the invitation of play, not only within the text, but in its bibliographic aspects. The way in which adult mediation of the text influences these responses is also clear, if we examine the children's reactions to this unusual book.

My intention with this study was to provide a research setting without a prescriptive agenda. Much of the empirical research into children's reading has been either questionnaire based, in an effort to gauge reading taste,[18] observation based, as is much of reading research in schools,[19] or interview based.[20] Though the interview approach is certainly valid, and is also the predominant method used in the rare empirical investigations of adult response, many are concerned with revealing "truths" behind particular critical agendas which add a further adult view to the questioning process. I have attempted to construct a research study which minimizes my own involvement as a mediating force and again, I have been influenced by a number of different sources.

Among the most exciting developments in recent years for those concerned with children's literature has been the work of Aidan Chambers, a novelist, teacher, lecturer and critic whose concerns are expressed through a wide knowledge and a commitment to 'literary' engagement with texts. He has said:

> I have often wondered why literary theorists haven't yet realized that the best demonstration of almost all they say when they talk about phenomenology or structuralism or deconstruction of any other critical approach can be most clearly and easily demonstrated in children's literature. The converse of this is to wonder why those

> of us who attend to children's literature are, or have been, so slow in drawing the two together. (Booktalk, p133)[21]

As I hope I have made clear, the changes he calls for are happening, if slowly.

Chambers has, with other teachers, devised an approach to working with children and books which has been influenced by the work of Iser, Culler, and Jerome Bruner, among others. Though his intention is pragmatic - "helping children to engage in the drama of reading" - the transcripts reveal the innate ability of young children to engage in a literary interaction with texts that is astonishing. To be brief, the Tell Me[22] approach is based on group interaction and nondirected response and discussion. What interests me here is the role of the teacher/researcher, who allows all kinds of response and is there merely to ask open ended questions and reaffirm interpretations. It demands a great deal of trust on the part of the teacher and the children because the response is not prescribed.

Although Chambers works with groups, the approach he adopts suggests a research method based on one-to-one interaction. My need was to minimize the pedagogic nature of the adult/child relationship and allow the individual children in my study to acknowledge whatever impressions they may have formed without the effort of having to fit into a preconceived interpretative agenda.

The emphasis on the individual's reading history and how the perception of what fiction is for influences response to the text has led me to Phenomenography. This research specialization, influenced by phenomenology, was developed in Sweden in the 80s with the aim of investigating learning through the perspective of the learner. Using the method of taped interviews and analysis of transcripts, the researcher endeavors to investigate the subject's "preconceived ideas about the phenomena dealt with in specific situations." These researches seem to reveal "a limited number of qualitatively different and logically interrelated ways in which the phenomenon or the situation is experienced and understood." This method has been used to investigate the effects on response of repeated readings of a Kafka short story, for instance, and the extent to which the results reveal how the text inscribes the reader's response, indicates its relevance to my own research. An open ended method of questioning, directed at parents, teachers and children, along with observations of book behavior of other kinds has allowed me to build up a picture of the way each individual perceives the phenomena of fiction.

It is already clear that perceptions vary widely among the seven families involved in the case studies. Whereas some households have no books around and reading is considered as an educational tool relegated to the schoolroom or as entertainment akin to watching television, there are also homes where children are exposed to a wide variety of texts and fiction is regarded as a communicative exchange between author and reader. These differing perceptions are evident among the teachers interviewed as well. It is also interesting to note that the importance of fiction for children and for adults was often perceived to be different.

Seven children took part in the study - 1 male 3 year old, 2 6/7 year olds (1 male, 1 female), 2 10/11 year olds (1 male/1 female), and 2 13/14 year olds (1 male, 1 female). All children chosen had good reading skills (except the 3 year old), but a broad range of enthusiasm and commitment to reading was sought. I also tried to choose schools according to different emphases on reading, but this was difficult.

I first interviewed the parents and met the children in their own homes as part of the Reading History. I then interviewed the children at their schools and began the Book choice study. We met at two week intervals - I met with all of the children 10 times, although I met with one 11 times. The procedure with the prereading child was different - I had him available all the time, and though I started in an organized way, this did not work, and so I began using a more ad hoc method, combining audio taping, note taking and videotaping book choice sessions.

Choosing the books that were used in the study was difficult. My particular interest was to investigate responses to books which allowed the reader to be "authorial" in the text, as opposed to texts which required only passive reception. Another feature of this contrast is the degree to which attention is called to the "fictionality" of the fiction. The authority invited by this 'active' kind of reading involves a "coauthorship" of the story, so that, rather than being drawn in to a fictional world, the reader is positioned both inside and outside. Of course, it is important to admit that it is not only the text which determines whether one reads actively or passively, and it is clear that the expectations of the reader when approaching the text determines how it is read. However, I wanted

to examine the possibility that the tendency to read in one way or another may be connected with the kind of reading one does as a child and the books that one is exposed to. This process must also be related to the mediating factors that surround these books, which include both parental and educational influence as well as bibliographical features and availability.

What the studies have revealed, is that

1. the degree to which children were willing to engage with the books physically bore a direct relation to the way they responded to them.
2. children who were read to frequently and from an early age were more ready to handle the books, and responded to them in a more 'authorial' way.
3. the younger children interacted more personally and actively to the texts than did the older children, in addition to being far less discriminating in the way they chose their books. These findings are supported by other research. The older children read passively for the most part, though some were obviously influenced by the opportunity to talk one-to-one about books. Though this effect was not intended, it is not surprising, as the booktalk that went on gave the child readers another kind of authority over the text.
4. all of the children exhibited an awareness, sometimes extremely critical, of the difference between what they read at school and what they read outside, but also an awareness of the difference in how they were asked to read and respond.

These observations suggest that there is a shift, with age, in the way that children respond to the fiction they read, from a "writerly," interactive involvement with the text toward a more passive response. This replacement of the authorial response to fiction, which, I would like to suggest, is the kind invited by a certain kind of text, with a less active one, is influenced by adult forces, those mediations which embrace both the personal transmission of the value of fiction and larger societal forces which determines how fiction is presented to children, from the design of the cover and writing of the blurb to the stocking of high street bookstores and libraries.

It is interesting to note that as the children move away from this "writerly" engagement with texts, the paratextual features that younger children ignore take precedence. The way in which the book is presented becomes part of the way it is read, defining the possibilities for the text, assuming the child's own expectations and closing off more personal and sometimes, deviant, readings. When these extratextual features jar too much with the actual experience of reading, dissatisfaction is obvious, and makes the whole process of reading fiction less pleasurable.

Observations of the responses to *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* reveal the different ways in which the children in the case studies reacted to a "writerly" reading experience. The book itself relies on a playful engagement with fiction, parodying the form and content of fairy tales alluded to and calling attention to the narrator's role. The narrator becomes a character and it is his influence that disrupts many of the expected outcomes of familiar stories. The design of the book calls attention to paratextual features usually taken for granted, for instance, the title page, the endpapers and the ISBN number. The surprise of these features causes a great deal of pleasure because rules are being broken in a way that calls attention to the activity of reading. The illustrations are strange and dark, but add to the sense of new perspectives on familiar objects that make the book so unusual and attractive. The 7 year old boy in the study, who, until recently, struggled with reading and has very little experience of being read to, was excited by the book and attracted by the illustration. He was particularly excited by the Blahs on the back page, and wanted to "tell it" to the rest of his class. He was proud of his ability to recognize the allusion to other fairy tales, "My favourite was the Stinky Cheese because it was like the Gingerbread Man." This sharing of the knowledge of the original tale, in addition to subverting it, gives the reader a sense of power in the text and he demonstrated this by telling me the story of himself in the book.

The ten year old boy also chose this book because it was "weird" and indicated the same enthusiasm, although he articulated it differently. What was especially interesting about his response was that this Point Horror/Stephen King fan read this book many times over the two week period and handled the book frequently when talking about it. Both actions were unusual for him, and both indicated the active participation he experienced with the book. Again, when asked what he liked about the book, he said, "It's good the Jack the Narrator kind of like comes up every so often (and here he showed me where) and he's got his own story - I like when that happens."

The thirteen year old (also a Point Horror/Stephen King fan) expressed the same preference, but made more of an attempt at articulating his own position within the text. "It feels more like - in depth - when you're reading it - everyone's talking to each other - it's real - a bit weird feeling about that." His favorite story was 'The Really Ugly Duckling'

> Once upon a time there was a mother duck and a father duck who had seven baby ducklings. Six of them were regular looking ducklings. The seventh was a really ugly duckling. Everyone used to say, "What a nice looking bunch of ducklings - all except that one. Boy, he's really ugly." The really ugly duckling heard these people, but he didn't care. He knew that one day he would probably grow up to be a swan and be bigger and look better than anything in the pond. (PAGE TURN, Larger Type Face) Well, as it turned out, he was just a really ugly duckling. And he grew up to be just a really ugly duck. The End.[23]

His response to this was "It's like they take these stories and take all the unreal endings out of it - all the good ones and put in the normal ones." I asked whether he meant more expected and he replied, "Yeah, but it's not expected because it's a fairy tale - so you're not expecting it to be ordinary - when you're reading a fairy tale you're expecting it to come out good." So the book invites him to take pleasure in the parody, but also to place him outside the book, questioning the form that is parodied.

Although none of the girls chose the book, the youngest picked it up at each session, made faces, said, "Yucch," and in our final session, she picked it up and gave me her reading of it. She was the most "active reader" of all the case study children, making even the most restrictive text into something new and exciting, but her reaction to *The Stinky Cheese Man* revealed both her authority over the text and perhaps the invitation for challenging play extended by the book itself.

K: The cheeseman, the big fat cheese man, a big fat poopy-poopy head and he blew up and he wee'd.
M: Do you see the stories in there?
K: Oooo- boopy-poopy. And then we have a horrible looking frog and then we have a meow cat (actually a fox) and then it talked - meow it said, meow it said. This is exciting!

The active participation and the authority-challenging flavor of her language are part of the same process, and when we try to control one, we often control the other. One of the most interesting features of The Stinky Cheese Man is that the largest chain of bookstores in the country made the decision not to stock it (expect in a few select stores) on the grounds that no one would buy it. This is probably true, it looks unusual and deliberately unattractive - although it is a bestseller in the US and in Australia. Although this may be an extreme example, it is evidence that we may be, in the process of getting children to read, destroying the very essence of the pleasure that arises from reading in an active and authorial way. As Aidan Chambers says in Booktalk:

> If we could all be authorial - readers who seek for the text written in the book, rather that writer-readers who want only that kind of text we already know about, can easily deal with, and is endlessly repeatable, we would be a nation of literary readers instead of unthinking consumers of one kind of pastime entertainment. (p110)

While looking for a way to give children a voice in the adult dominated world of children's fiction, I have found it in the nature of the text themselves.

Endnotes:

1 Hollindale, P., *Ideology and the Children's Book*, Thimble Press, 1988.
2 John Stephens' book, *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (Longman Group UK, 1992), though directed toward its practical relevance, reveals the value of a theoretical approach to language when considering children's texts.
3 Rose, Jacqueline, *The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, Macmillan, London, 1984.

4 Reference is made here to an paper given by Christine Wilkie, entitled "The Dilemma of Children's Literature and Its Criticism," delivered at WCHE, February 1995. This paper, published as an occasional paper through WCHE provides an excellent analysis of the subject as it is regarded in institutions of Higher Education and raises fascinating and important questions about the climate of debate in the realms of Children's Literature criticism.

5 Eco, Umberto, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, Hutchinson University Library, London, 1981.

6 For instance, *The Three Astronauts*, Secker & Warburg, London (no publication date)

7 Fox, C., *At the Very Edge of the Forest: The Influence of Literature on Storytelling by Children*, Cassell, London, 1993. This book is essential reading for anyone researching children's literature, not only for its content, but also for the integrity of Fox's practice.

8 Matthews has written three books on this subject, all of which support the notion of the willingness and natural ability with which very young children engage with, and pose, philosophical questions. Children's literature is central to his method and to his theoretical stance. HIs latest book is The *Philosophy of Childhood*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1994.

9 Eagleton, T., *Literary Theory An Introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1983.

10 Iser has contributed a chapter, entitles 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach' to Jane Tompkins' excellent book, *Reader Response Criticism From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1980.

11 Iser, W., *The Act of Reading*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1978.

12 Culler, J., *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1975.

13 In *Literary Theory An Introduction*

14 In Selden, R. & Widdowson, P., *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, Harvester, London, 1993. (p 142)

15 Urwin, C., "Power Relations and the Emergence of Language" in Henriques et al *Changing the Subject: Psychology, Social Regulation and Subjectivity*, Metheun, London, 1984.

16 Naumann, M., "Literary Production and Reception," *New Literary History*, Vol 8.1, 1976.

17 McGann, J., *The Textual Condition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1991.

18 For example, *Contemporary Juvenile Reading Habits A Study of Young People's Reading at the End of the Century*, Children's Literature Research Center, Roehampton Institute, 1994.

19 For example, Cochran-Smith,M., *The Making of a Reader*, Ablex Publishing Corporation, Norwood, NJ, 1984.

20 Examples include Sarland, C., *Young People Reading: Culture & Response*, Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1991 and Fry, D., *Children Talk About Books: Seeing Themselves as Readers*, Open University Press, 1985.

21 Chambers, A., *Booktalk*, The Bodley Head, London, 1985.

22 Further Information about this approach to helping children talk about books is available in Chambers' book, *Tell Me: Children, Reading and Talk*, Thimble Press, Stroud, 1993.

23 Scieszka, J & Smith, L *The Stinky Cheese Man and other Fairly Stupid Tales*, Puffin Books, London, 1992.